

WHEN HAMILTON WAS A RAIL CENTRE

It may be hard to imagine but Hamilton was once the Railway Centre of Ontario. Starting over 160 years ago Sir Allan MacNab, as a Member of Parliament representing Hamilton, declared that "Railways were his politics". As president of a local railway investment group, he convinced the builders of the Great Western Railway Company to build their new railway through Hamilton. Connecting Buffalo to Detroit, it was the first steam railway in southern Ontario; the first of four steam railways to operate through Hamilton (Hamilton & Lake Erie, Hamilton & Northwest, and Toronto, Hamilton & Buffalo). In addition to the steam railways, with the introduction of electricity at the beginning of the 20th century, Hamilton also became the centre of a major interurban electric railway system. How times change! Today, Hamilton has been waiting decades for an expanded Go Train Service and is looking for a provincial handout to improve public rail transit.

For city dwellers living on top of the escarpment far removed from what is left of the city's rail system today, it may be difficult to believe that Hamilton Mountain once had a steam railway service and a station. After his success in building the Great Western Railway into Hamilton, Allan MacNab planned to expand his railway empire to Lake Erie. In 1855 he became President of the Hamilton and Port Dover Railway, which began constructing a track bed up the face of the escarpment following the Red Hill Valley. Building a railway up the face of the escarpment was a costly venture and not unlike the current Red Hill Expressway, it ran into delays and financial problems. With new investors and re-organization the railway finally reached Port Dover as the Hamilton and Lake Erie Railway in 1878.

At the top of the escarpment, the depot for the busy Mount Albion community was called Rymal Station. It was located on Dartnall Road, marked today by a cooperative garden supply company. For many generations, mountain residents would see passenger trains heading south, crowded with beach holiday makers and freight trains loaded with fresh fish returning from the Erie fisheries.

An improved provincial highway system and the Depression years of the 1930s brought a close to the Port Dover section of the railway. After many years of disuse, the Hamilton/Caledonia section was closed and converted into a rail trail in 1997.

However, like the old Hamilton and Lake Erie Railway, the Linc and Red Hill Expressway are once again bringing economic life back to the Mount Albion section of the mountain.



PHOTO BY R. SANDUSKY, PUBLISHED IN RAILS TO THE LAKE BY C. COOPER

This Hamilton & Lake Erie steam train approaches Mount Albion at the top of the escarpment overlooking the Red Hill Valley on its way to Port Dover.



PHOTO BY ROBERT WILLIAMSON

The identical scene today near the intersection of Mountain Brow Blvd. and Mohawk Road East, shows the track bed, like many of our old railways, converted to a rail trail.

Mountain Memories, written by historian Robert Williamson on behalf of the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society, appears monthly in the Mountain News.